DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 370 893 SP 035 146

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TITLE Study Groups: Conduit for Reform.
PUB DATE 7 Dec 91
NOTE 16p.; Paper presented at the Meeting of the National Staff Development Council (St. Louis, MO, December 7, 1991).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Guides - General (050) -- Historical Materials (060)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Discussion Groups; Educational Change; *Educational History; Elementary School Teachers; Elementary Secondary Education; Faculty Development; *Inservice Teacher Education; Models; School Districts; Secondary School Teachers; Teacher Behavior; Teacher Effectiveness; *Teacher Improvement
IDENTIFIERS Dependents Schools; *Study Groups

ABSTRACT

This conference presentation describes study groups as a mechanism for changing teacher behavior. The history of study groups is discussed, beginning with the first American study groups organized by Benjamin Franklin; the Chautauqua Literary and Scientific Circle; the waning of study groups in the early 20th century as college enrollment increased; adult study circles in Sweden; and study groups in the U.S. at the end of World War II focusing on public policy. In the area of teachers' professional development, research has shown that schools with "high success" and "high involvement" have been characterized by precise, frequent talk about teaching practice and teachers teaching one another the craft of teaching. Study groups in Richmond County (Georgia), which met weekly to discuss teaching models, plan lessons, and share feedback, helped teachers in acquiring new teaching models and had a positive impact on student achievement. Four distinct models of study groups useful for the study of teaching and learning include: the implementation study group, the institutionalization study group, the research-sharing group, and the investigation study group. A worldwide staff development program initiated by the Department of Defense Dependents' Schools pays teacher volunteers to serve as facilitators for study groups. Major factors in successful study groups include: the groups' belief system, administrative support, effective facilitators, regularly scheduled meetings, sharing classroom experiences, and refreshments. (Contains 14 references.) (JDD)

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ED 370 893

Study groups: Conduit for reform

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A paper presented at the National Staff Development Council
December 7, 1991, St. Louis, MO.

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Study groups: Conduit for reform

The great challenge of education at present lies not only in discovering ways to better teach our children, but in discovering the tools to allow teachers to quickly acquisition these new ways of teaching. In the last ten years alone, numerous innovations- from cooperative learning to restructured schools- have been introduced to large numbers of teachers. Yet anyone observing in schools notes that examples of teachers consistently engaged in new methods of behaving are few and far between. One reason is that the technologies for implementing innovations- for transferring material learned in a training session to actual classroom practice- are limited. However, one such tool holds great promise for changing teacher behavior- the mechanism of study groups.

Definition and attributes of study groups

We have chosen to define study groups as "educators studying their craft knowledge together." In this framework, any teacher or administrator can be part of a study group. The focus of the"study," however, must be on knowledge about the art and science of teaching: the strategies of cooperative learning, hands-on math and science, whole language, integrated curriculum or alternative assessment, for example; but not on teacher salaries, building maintenance or other peripheral issues. The three attributes which seem critical to effective study groups are: regularly scheduled meetings, a volunteer basis, and focus on teaching and learning. To be effective, study groups must be

based on a choice made by an educator that he or she truly wants to engage in serious study about a topic. Also, this must be a predictable occurrence that is planned and part of the educator's work life.

During effective study groups, educators must engage in "productive talk" as defined by Little (1984). This encompasses three elements: 1) a common language for sharing ideas about teaching and learning 2) a limited focus on one or two key issues that can be absorbed within an interaction and 3) hard evidence that makes the discussion concrete, relevant, and accessible.

History of study groups

Study groups have a long history in American education. The first recorded advocate of study groups in America was Benjamin Franklin, who organized Friday night meetings of serious-minded young businessmen in colonial Pennsylvania for the purpose of reviewing moral and successful business practice. The motto of the study group, termed the Junto, was, "Individuals associated can do more for society, and themselves, than they can in isolation" (Zemke, 1982).

More academic in nature, another example of study groups can be found in the women's study clubs which emerged late in the nineteenth century. These clubs, modeled after a traditional university structure, allowed women to study classical writings in depth- a practice found usually only in predominantly male colleges and universities (Martin, 1990). The study clubs usually were comprised of fewer than 20 women who met biweekly in each other's homes for a period of approximately two hours. Acceptable

discussion topics included literature and history, but issues related to religion and politics were taboo. Each member was expected to prepare a paper based on assigned readings prior to the meeting. Parliamentary procedure dictated the progress of sharing the papers during the meeting. At first, rotational leadership was employed, but discarded as impractical; thereafter, leaders were elected by the group on an annual basis. By the early 1900's, as many as one million American women belonged to study clubs which were similar in content and design.

A simultaneous effort that resulted in "home study circles" was sponsored by the Chautauqua Literary and Scientific Circle in New York in the 1870's (Oliver, 1987). This society organized curricula for correspondence study based on readings and discussion among a group of interested adults who had received no post-secondary training. By 1915 over 15,000 home study circles were operating using the Chautauqua texts and ancillary materials.

The parallel emergence of study groups in the continuing education of public school teachers can be traced to the institution of "reading circles" in the late 1800's. Groups of teachers studied state-approved texts and reacted to their readings through discussion and sharing. Participation in a reading circle could be applied toward certification requirements. The circles provided inexpensive and flexible staff development (DeLuca, 1991).

Despite their enthusiastic following, study groups in the United States waned throughout the first quarter of the twentieth century, largely due to the increase in college and university enrollment, particularly among women. However, a movement toward

adult self-directed education was achieving unprecedented success in Sweden. Although the Swedish oligarchy had a history of providing free lectures for the working class, it was the experience of Oscar Olasson, a Swedish temperance advocate, that resulted in the introduction of adult study groups. Olasson visited Lake Chautauqua in New York and observed the home study circles at work. He was greatly impressed by what he saw and subsequently wrote an article in Sweden urging the adoption of home study circles to bolster the crusade for temperance. The idea quickly took hold and expanded. Study groups flourished largely as a result of the free church movement and the trade union's movement, which recognized the advantage of educating a largely uneducated populace as an aid to social change. The groups moved gradually from studies of religious, economic and political issues to largely cultural ones (Arvidson, 1986).

At present, study circles are a major force in adult education in Sweden. There are ten national educational organizations that organize and maintain the study circles, and since 1947 these have been subsidized by the Swedish government (Oliver, 1987). Requirements are that a study circle has at least five and no more than twenty participants and must be in session for at least fifteen hours spread over a minimum of four weeks. The organizers pride themselves on a pedagogy that encompasses what are considered the critical functions of a study circle: equality and democracy among participants; maximizing each member's capacities; cooperation and companionship; member self-determination of format and direction; planning and comprehensiveness; active member participation; and use of printed

study materials. Study group leaders volunteer and receive training in group study methods from the educational associations. Since 1947, participation in study circles has increased by at least ten percent a year, and is now the most common type of adult education in Sweden.

In the United States, the end of World War II marked a resurgence of interest in study groups, although they now focused on public policy discussion (Oliver, 1987). In 1947 the Great Books program was founded at the University of Chicago and provided a model for small discussion groups to relate the messages of acknowledged great books to contemporary problems. Leader training sessions insured high quality meetings and have continued to produce successful results. Currently the program lists more than twenty-five hundred discussion groups. Other models for public policy discussion included the American Heritage project begun in 1951, which was funded by grants funneled through the American Library Association, but which dissolved when funds were withdrawn. Another study group, the American Foundation for Continuing Education, operated for two decades and focused on current issues. The Foreign Policy Association instituted its "Great Decisions" program in 1955, with meetings held in February and March to address questions of current governmental policies. As of 1985 it numbered 150,000 active members.

A renewed interest in the use of study groups in teachers' professional development has been sparked by a number of recent events in American education. In 1981 Little researched the characteristics of schools conducive to continual "learning on the job." Little found that "high success" and "high involvement"

schools were characterized by collegial interaction including:

- precise, frequent talk about teaching practice;
- frequent observation and feedback on practice;
- joint planning; and
- teachers teaching one another the craft of teaching (Little, 1982).

At very much the same time, researchers including Joyce and Showers (1982) and Mohlman (1982) were experimenting with ways of providing feedback to teachers engaged in accessioning new teaching strategies. Both researchers found that teachers acting as peer observers could provide feedback as effectively as qualified trainers in order to actuate transfer to the workplace. Showers termed the method "peer coaching" and demonstrated that it was very successful in transferring newly learned teaching skills to the classroom (1982, 1984). Numerous studies have confirmed the power of using peers to provide feedback to aid transfer of an innovation to the workplace. A long-term study completed by Joyce, Showers, Murphy and Murphy (1989) used study groups to implement new teaching models in schools in Richmond County, Georgia, following summer workshops. These study groups were composed of teachers who met weekly after school to discuss use of the models, plan lessons and share feedback about teaching they had observed. Leaders were not appointed but rather emerged. At times the configuration of the groups was changed when it became apparent that leaders were not present. The study showed that through the study group vehicle teachers were able to acquisition new teaching models and positively impact student achievement.

Models of study groups

There appear to be four distinct models of study groups useful for the study of teaching and learning. One is the implementation study group, which exists to support prior learning obtained from inservice workshops or courses. The goal of this study group is to aid educators in utilizing new methods or strategies of teaching. In this study group model, the group is tying theory to practice and validating (with each member's own experience) the ideas learned in the workshop. Emphasis is placed on the mastery of a new skill through study and discussion about what is being utilized. The study groups in Richmond County described by Joyce, Showers, Murphy and Murphy (1989) were clearly examples of the model.

A second study group model is the institutionalization study group. In this model, teachers have clearly mastered a new strategy or technique, but do not wish to lose the advances they have made. Therefore, they meet to discuss ways they are using the strategy and explore further refinements and applications. For example, a group of teachers who have clearly integrated computers into their daily teaching may wish to meet to continue to explore new ways of using computers and become even more versatile in their utilization.

A third type of study group is the research-sharing group. This study group model promotes acquisition of new knowledge and ties the world of research to the world of practice. In this study group, teachers are responsible for reading, understanding and relating to current educational research. Casanova and Heisinger (1988) reported on the partnership of the Washington

Education Association and the Arizona State University to create a vehicle to enhance teacher use of research. The goal was to place teachers in command of their own professional development by enabling them to read and apply research findings. The method for accessing research was modeled after the Great Books discussion program. Groups of teachers read previously prepared research materials which were topic-centered. A facilitator (who was a teacher volunteer) guided a small group in the study of a topic which they selected. University personnel prepared packets of original research based on the criteria of clarity, brevity and significance. The research was annotated to clarify unfamiliar verbiage, and an introductory packet was used to introduce typical concepts. During the pilot study, meetings lasted approximately an hour for a period of three to four weeks. Pre- and post-questionnaires showed that teachers felt more positively toward reading research and towards collegial learning as a result of the study groups.

A fourth and final model of study groups can be termed the investigation study group. In this model, teachers identify a topic that they would like to learn more about. Through reading, discussion and experimentation in their classrooms, they actually teach themselves new strategies. The study group becomes the vehicle for both theory and practice. This type of study group most closely reflects the concept of the "learning company" discussed by Pedler, Boydell, and Burgoyne (1989) in which the organization continually monitors and defines its own growth.

Use of study groups in a large-scale initiative

In 1989 the Department of Defense Dependents' Schools (at that time the nation's ninth largest school district, spread out over 22 countries to serve the dependents of U.S. military overseas) adopted a worldwide staff development program based on a common body of pedagogical information. The goal was to provide teachers with a knowledge base of teaching through inservice training followed by long-term engagement in volunteer study groups at each school. Teacher volunteers were paid to serve as facilitators for study groups at each school. A recent informal survey of schools in Germany, the largest region, indicated that most meetings lasted for approximately one hour, had less than 10 members, and were held once a month. A large range of topics were addressed in the study groups including cooperative learning, learning styles, time management, graphic organizers, praise and momentum.

Factors in successful study groups

The study groups were monitored and data was collected in several pilot schools. A number of factors were found to positively impact the tendency of study groups to thrive and continue meeting. Although final analysis will not be done for a number of years, some preliminary indicators are worth discussing.

A major factor in successful study groups is the belief system which supports them. First is the belief that what is known about teaching is fluid and ever-expanding. At no time is a teacher "done" with the study of teaching. Second is the corollary belief that effective teachers continually add new strategies and methodologies to their repertoire. Study groups in

which the beliefs are articulated have excellent prospects for success; however, a series of other dimensions also positively impact the outcome of study groups.

It is critical in the establishing and maintenance of a study group to have administrative support. Schools in which the principal or assistant principal actually attends the study group (as a participant, not the "leader") have been found to have the highest attendance. The size of the study group can fluctuate, but between three and twelve seems to be most workable. Fewer than three tends to disintegrate, whereas in groups larger than twelve many participants feel frustrated because they are not able to participate as much as they would like.

A key factor in successful study groups is a facilitator who is a member of the group but who also organizes and structures the meetings. The facilitator is carefully selected based on: respect of peers; a mastery of teaching processes; good analytical skills; and commitment to professional development. The facilitator's task is to insure that the groups continue to meet. To that end, the facilitator plans and executes the meetings, coordinates and disseminates information, and acts as a liason with administrators. Clearly the role of the facilitator is extensive enough to warrant some compensation. Techniques that have been used include release time (in the form of a daily free period which is handled by someone else), pay in the form of an extracurricular stipend, and/or university credit.

As mentioned previously, regularly scheduled meetings are critical to the success of study groups. The facilitator sets the time, date and meeting place of the study group meetings for the

whole year after consulting with the group. The most successful study groups seem to meet weekly or biweekly, although once a month is also possible. Less frequent meetings appear to be unable to generate the momentum necessary to continue. During the study group meeting, a number of tasks are addressed. A recommended agenda for a study group would be:

5 minutes- Introduction of tasks

15-20 minutes- Input (new or review)

10-15 minutes- Discussion of input

20-25 minutes- Sharing of classroom experience

5 minutes- Close and reminder of next meeting

The total time of the study group meeting should be approximately one hour. There is no "homework" except to voluntarily try out new ideas.

A good portion of the meeting is spent in exploring new ideas. The input for these ideas can come from a variety of sources, including journals, newsletters, commercial videos or book chapters. The input can be provided to participants by the facilitator ahead of time, or be presented during the meeting. In addition, outsiders can be invited to provide the input, such as university professors, teacher experts or district staff development trainers.

The strength of much of what happens during a study group is sharing of classroom experiences; it occupies a great deal of the the time and provides the practical evidence that makes the information concrete and credible to other teachers. Without the sharing of classroom experiences the study group is unlikely to be valuable to any of the participants. It is the usefulness of the

craft knowledge being studied that makes learning occur. The facilitator must be instrumental in insuring that an open atmosphere exists in which educators are willing to share the results of their efforts.

A seemingly minor but powerful element which enhances successful study groups is the provision of refreshments at study group meetings, especially if the participants are teachers at the end of a long and tiring day. Since it is difficult for teachers themselves to prepare the refreshments, volunteer organizations such as PTA groups, community organizations or school vocational programs can be approached for help. These same volunteers might be also asked to help with handouts and duplicating services, if the office staff is unable to provide those. It is the responsibility of the facilitator to coordinate these volunteer efforts.

Conclusion

Study groups have had a long history of success in adult education, both inside and outside the United States. Study groups may be one vehicle that not only drives but sustains reform efforts in schools. However, there are many factors which determine whether the study groups will be successful in schools. A powerful belief system in the form of teacher as learner, administrator support, and a facilitator who aids in study group processes are some of the elements that appear to be critical to the success of a study group. With these elements in place, a sustained change effort may be achievable.

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